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ABSTRACT

This descriptive study examined Ananda School (Nevada City, California) grades K-7, or as it is now called, Living Wisdom School (LWS). The specific goal was to examine the model of spiritual development embodied in the LWS program, its interpersonal dynamics, and its curriculum. The study sought to understand how the school operates within the broader philosophical and spiritual context in which it is situated. The school community consists of 52 students and 5 full-time teachers; the Ananda church members live together in a 75-unit apartment complex located about 4 miles from the school. The study was conducted at intervals over a 1-year period. While "Education for Life" is acknowledged as the central philosophy of the school, the uniqueness of the school hinges on a combination of factors, particularly the character of its teachers. In light of educational theory, Ananda exemplifies Noddings moral education framework based on an ethic of caring, as well as Dewey's philosophy of attending to individual needs and capacities. (Includes a figure ("Ananda rules"), 19 notes, 4 references, and an appendix offering background on Ananda.) (BT)

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One Look at Postmodern Religious Education: A Portrait of Ananda School

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1. Introduction

Driving in the environs of my hometown, I happened to one day to notice the banner hung outside the familiar mission-style buildings of a former Catholic church. The banner read "Ananda School, Grades K-8". The mission-style church, which I recalled passing many times while growing up, was closed and sold several years ago by the Catholic diocese, due to a consolidation of parishes in the area. Though the buildings structurally remained much the same, they now housed what seemed to be a very different, or at least different-looking, religious practice. This Roman Catholic parish, formerly known as St. Boniface[1], had become the Ananda Church of Self-Realization and the Ananda School[2]. My curiosity was peaked.

2. About the Study

This paper is a descriptive study of Ananda School, which will heretofore be referred to by its new name (1999), Living Wisdom School (abbreviated here as LWS). My specific goal as a researcher has been to examine the model of spiritual development that is embodied in the LWS program, its interpersonal dynamics and its curriculum. I also sought to understand how the school operates within the broader philosophical and spiritual context in which it is situated.

Over the course of my study, my experiences of both 'church' and 'school' at Ananda would prove to be at once foreign and familiar when reflected back upon my Catholic upbringing. From a physical standpoint, the classrooms themselves are housed in the old St. Boniface parish hall, which stood adjacent to the Church, and another larger out-building, most likely the former priests' rectory. The staff offices and a small giftshop are also located in the out-building. The church building itself is used for Ananda services throughout the week, including Sunday, and its "sanctuary" serves as the meeting place for whole-school gatherings.

The members of the school community responded openly to my inquiries for information. I should clarify the use of the word *community* in this paper. While above, its use refers to the teachers, students, and parents at Living Wisdom School, the phrase "*Ananda Community*" as used in conversation by my informants refers to the physical group of 100 or so Ananda church members who live together in a single 75-unit apartment complex located about five miles from the church/school. All members of the Ananda church staff and the school's teachers live at the Community (I capitalize it here to distinguish it from the use of the word 'community' in a broader sense), located about 4 miles from the school. The Community residence serves as an off-site gathering place for school and church functions.[3]

LWS is eight years old, and the second Ananda-affiliated School to be founded. It is a relatively small school, and has at present 52 students and 5 full-time teachers, with grades K-7 in combination classrooms. 20% of the students are from Ananda Community families; the remainder come from area families who find the LWS educational program appealing for a variety of reasons.

My study of the school was conducted at intervals over a one-year period. I observed classes and the major school functions, such as the annual fund-raiser at a local park, open house, the theatre production, and the end-of-year ceremony. I had conversations with many in the

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[1] Pseudonyms are used for all names of persons and places in this study

[2] *Ananda School* was the original name for the several schools founded by members of the Ananda Church of Self-Realization, and based on the principles of Education for Life (J. Donald Walters, 1997); during the writing of this paper (1999), the school was renamed *Living Wisdom School*, and the Ananda Church as simply *Ananda*.

[3] Refer to Appendix for further description of the Ananda Community

school community, including the church staff, teachers, parents and children. The teachers were understandably protective of their students' learning environment, and as such, any observations were undertaken with prior permission and scheduling.

3. Educational Philosophy

A distinguishing feature of Living Wisdom School is the pervasiveness of its philosophy. LWS implements a philosophy for learning which is embedded in larger framework for living. Central to this framework is a specific understanding of the human person that hinges on conceptions of inner spirit, positive energy, and the cultivation of the one's own awareness of his/her relation to others and to the divine.

The school is clear to say that it provides "no 'religious instruction' in the parochial sense"[4]. However, it does provide a spiritually-grounded educational framework, one which emphasizes the unity and essential common truth of all religions, and which is rooted in the guidance of Ananda's spiritual teachers. Because of its relevance to the educational environment, I have included in the Appendix a brief history and background on Ananda.

3.1 "Education for Life"

The first Ananda School, founded some thirty years ago for the purposes of educating the children in the original Ananda community, sought to "approach education afresh, from a standpoint of the art of living."[5] The Ananda teachers evaluated various progressive models of education prevalent at the time, but found them incomplete. Harking back to the inspiration of Yogananda, they committed themselves to creating an educational environment based on the premise that

> "a growing child needs to learn how to live in this world, and not merely how to find and hold a job. He or she needs to know how to live wisely, happily, and successfully according to his own deep inner needs, and not to meet life with the expectation that money and a nice home will give him all that he really wants in life."[6]

The Education for Life program began to take shape at the first Ananda School. The lessons and philosophy that emerged in the process of developing this program are described in a book called *Education for Life*, authored by J. Donald Walters.

In *Education for Life*, Walters writes broadly about educational goals, purposes, human development, and curriculum. Philosophically, *Education for Life* embraces a holistic model of education focused on the development of a child towards maturity, where maturity is defined by Walters as "the ability to relate appropriately to other realities than one's own."[7]. Walters provides specific examples of educational activities and student-teacher interactions that embody the spirit of this model.

As one illustration, Walters here proposes having more mature, or students of "greater expansive awareness"[8] to help foster growth in less mature students:

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[4] Quoted from Ananda School information brochure

[5] J. D. Walters, *Education for Life*, 1997; p. 186
[6] Ibid. p. 186
[7] Ibid. p. 31
[8] Ibid. p. 97

> My proposal concerns a shift of emphasis, of direction. At present, the view is from below upward, in the sense of bringing low students up to a level where, it is hoped, all will be able to move onwards together.
>
> Here, then, is the proposal: Instead of working upward from below, why not work downward from above?
>
> How? Quite simply, by enlisting the help of "lighter" students to uplift the "heavier."
>
> ... What every teacher ought to do, instead, is assiduously cultivate leadership qualities in any student who shows inclination to reach down and help others below him on the 'ladder' to grow toward true emotional maturity.[9]

Walters also advocates experiential learning, imaginative pedagogy, and "humanizing" academic subjects:

> From the standpoint of the Education for Life system, there is much to be gained from learning to approach any new subject as it were from within – from its core, rather than from its periphery. And one way to accomplish this feat is for the student to be involved totally in whatever subject he or she is given to study.[10]

In addition, dramatic play, dancing, singing, and painting are encouraged as ways of directing energy positively and harmoniously.

"Education for Life" is now a separate non-profit organization that provides resources and summer workshops for teachers, principals, home-schooling parents, and others interested in the integration of these ideas into curricula.

While "Education for Life" is acknowledged as the central philosophy of the school, the uniqueness of the school hinges on a combination of factors. The staff attests to the fact that each of the "Education for Life" schools started by Ananda has its own particular character. Over the course of my study, it became apparent that the school community attributes much of the school's character to its teachers' personalities, their individual spiritual sensibilities, as well as their talents.

4. The Teachers

The full-time faculty consists of the 4 full-time teachers (Kindergarten, combined 1^{st}-2^{nd}, combined $3^{rd}4^{th}$, combined 5^{th}-7^{th}) and one student teacher whose primary focus is mathematics. The school also has part-time teachers for areas such as science, physical education, yoga postures, and dance. Like any other school, each teacher brings a unique style, personality, and set of experiences to his/her classroom. The principal and head teacher, each having 30 years of experience, serve in a "master-teacher" capacity with respect to the newer teachers. Together with the parents, they form a closely-knit team whose intense focus is the nurturing and development of the children in their care. One parent comments:

> The teachers here are so amazing. They will discuss whatever needs to be discussed. If I see something that comes up and tell them about it, we'll discuss it immediately and try to come up with solutions. During different parent teacher conferences that we've had,

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[9] Ibid. p. 96-97
[10] Ibid. p. 60-61

there are various issues that they've been noticing with each child, and they'll bring it up. And then we tend to work on it... sometimes it's just a matter of talking about it [with the child] and then it gets resolved.

Key to this responsiveness is the priority placed on knowing each and every child, and not just by the student's immediate teacher. All of the teachers know all of the students personally and greet each one by name as they cross paths during the school day. As one student commented: "The teachers know a lot about the kids so they can help with their lives."

"Scheduled" faculty meetings occur once a week, with communication open and decision-making inclusive. However, one distinct difference between the teachers at Ananda and most other schools, private or public, is that the teachers live together (in the Ananda community), and are very close friends as well as co-workers. They consider themselves "family" (in some cases literally – e.g. head teacher, Naomi, who teachers $1^{st}/2^{nd}$, is the mother of Lynn, who teaches 3^{rd}-4^{th} grade.) Discussion of school-related issues is carried on continually throughout each day and naturally creeps into their socializing outside of school hours.

Teachers also speak about the privilege of being able to work with the children, and about how the Ananda environment fosters their own growth, in allowing them to push the bounds of their creativity. In response to my comment about the level of effort the teachers seem required to exert in this kind of environment, Naomi, the head teacher, responded: "If our work has great meaning it's the same as our play. I don't draw much of a distinction at all."

5. The School Day

Curriculum at Ananda varies from day to day, with certain subjects like language, social studies, and mathematics taking place daily, and others like physical education, dance, science, and music happening once or twice a week. Rooms of the former Catholic church rectory (priests' residence) and parish hall were converted into the school's classrooms, lending a rather non-traditional feeling.

5.1 Circle Time

A day in the LWS classroom begins with a class circle, and on Fridays a whole school circle in the sanctuary. One does not hear the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance the first thing in the morning at Ananda. Instead, students and teachers recite, and engage physically, in a series of affirmations intended to bring the children into a state of conscious readiness. The children are encouraged to affirm themselves joyfully and "smilingly".

The littlest ones, as in most schools, brim with enthusiasm in their recitations, while the older children are predictably less effusive. The children march vigorously in place, announcing "I am awake and ready!" Following their teacher, they spread their arms out to the side and say, "I am positive!", then reaching forward, "Energetic!", then reaching up, "Enthusiastic!" They then rub their entire bodies briskly, saying, "Awake, rejoice my body cells!" Rapping their fists briskly over their skull they exclaim, "Be glad my brain! Be wise and strong!" Continuing to tap their entire body with their fists, they affirm several times: "I am master of my body! I am master of myself!"[11] Finally, the group recites together:

[11] These affirmations are suggested by Walters in *Education for Life*, p. 72.

I am brave and I am strong.
I am cool, I am calm.
I am sweet, I am kind.
I am love and sympathy.
I am charming and majestic.
I am pleased with all.
I wipe away all tears and fears.
I have no enemy.
I am the friend of all.
I am free. I am free.

This is followed by singing and chanting to the accompaniment of the harmonium, an accordion-like instrument traditionally played with Hindu chant. The songs are written by Walters, or are those sung in the school's theatre productions. The chants are simple repetitive English or Sanskrit phrases, most often recitations of the names of God. The purpose of chanting is to quiet the mind, normally as a precursor to meditation. Circle time often includes healing prayers, in which the children pray for others in need. Older children are also introduced to meditation as part of their morning circle.

During the whole school circle that I observed, after the affirmations are completed, the school celebrated one boy's birthday. The children take turns making special wishes for him as he sits in the center of the circle. Only those who wished to speak do so, but each teacher and most of the children voice special wishes. One girl of 7 or 8 years says, "I wish that your life might be like a bouquet of flowers." Others say, "May your life be filled with joy." The teachers each share their own unique and caring wishes with the birthday boy. A young man of 8 or 9 exclaims, "Tante belle cose!" which in Italian means "Many beautiful things!" (the older students are studying some Italian as part of their curriculum). At their turn, two girls chorused in unison, "Happy Birthday!"

After the Friday morning circle, the oldest children (4th through 6th grades) go on a walk with the kindergarten class. Each child in the kindergarten pairs with an older student as they walk hand-in-hand around the block, with both teachers accompanying. The walk passes by a non-through street where the teachers tell the students to race to the end and back as fast as they can. While the youngsters take off eagerly, some of the older girls are not enthusiastic about running, even the relatively short distance, and keep to themselves. Their teacher reprimands them for not "getting in the spirit of the activity", and they eventually take their half-hearted jog down the block.

5.2 The Classroom

I observed the first/second grade on different occasions. It is one of the larger classes with eleven students. Common to each classroom in the school is a small altar that sits on a low table containing symbols and illustrations of various faiths, as well as symbols and artifacts that the children themselves may hold personally sacred. Around upper walls the first/second grade classroom are posted in colorful letters the words Love, Harmony, Truth, Peace, Joy, Enthusiasm, Peace, Joy, Calmness, Laughter, and Concentration. A sign by the door reads, "If you can talk you can sing. If you can walk you can dance."

First/second grade science class, which is taught by a volunteer teacher/parent. The science teacher plans her curricula around the state and national science frameworks, using her

own creativity to bring the curriculum to life. One week I observed, the class was in the middle of a multi-week study of the rainforest, which involved reading, researching, and writing about the ecosystem and ecology of the rainforest. A key activity for the class was to build, over several weeks, a model of a rainforest on top of a four-by-six foot plywood base. A paper-mache terrain was applied and painted. In successive weeks, the class covered the terrain with handmade trees, cheetahs, birds, and tropical flowers. The model also included a deforested area that no longer supported any life. Each of the plants and animals was created from cutout paper tracings of the students' hands, so that, for example, a cheetah's four legs and a tail took its form from an inverted hand cut-out.

The multi-grade combination classrooms require that teachers create separate activities and assignments for each grade by subject area as necessary. Often within the context of these larger themes, the teacher may need to develop sub-activities appropriate to grade-level. The school's curriculum emphasizes a coming together in common activity at the whole-school level (e.g. the theatre production; the Joyathon) and the classroom level (multi-grade project-based activities), as well as the development of grade-appropriate skills and abilities (e.g. learning math concepts).

The upper grade ($5^{th}/6^{th}/7^{th}$) classroom had 9 students, with seven girls and two boys. This was a small and cozy upstairs room in a same building as the staff offices. In addition to shelves full of books, there were a half dozen computers along the wall. A large poster which I had also seen in the other classrooms, entitled "Living Wisdom School Rules", was posted on the wall by the teacher's desk. The class was studying math when I visited. The students were being asked to select a brunch entree from a real menu from a local Italian restaurant with the constraint that they had only thirteen dollars to spend, including tax and tip, and that they would want to save some money for a gelato. They needed to justify their choice by showing their calculations, which included multiplying decimals. This exercise was one of many that over the course of several weeks led up to the culminating activity of an outing for brunch at the restaurant followed by gelato. Additionally, the students had been learning some Italian all year, and had acquired a basic vocabulary, which in part was motivated by the requirement that they order their meal in Italian. The brunch also celebrated their meeting their class goal of reading over one hundred books independently in three months, and for getting "all the rocks in the basket".[12]

6. Fostering Development

Ananda, like most private schools, must respond to the demand for high academic standards. However, intellectual development is just one aspect of the school's focus. Equal emphasis is placed the nurturing of the child's emotional and spiritual development, both of which are linked to a larger understanding of "self-realization".[13]

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[12] Rocks in the Basket is an activity created by Ananda' head teacher, akin to the "pebbles in a jar" concept for encouraging positive behaviors but with a more holistic focus. The teacher explains to the students that this is a way "to celebrate the many ways they are growing more aware, kinder, and, therefore, happier every day." She gives examples of the kind of behaviors or actions that will be celebrated by placing a rock in the basket, e.g. sharing, being cheerful, helpfulness, etc. Students and the teacher bring to one another's attention such signs of positive energy as they happen, and the rocks are added to the basket. When the basket is full, the class holds a special celebration.

[13] Elaborated in the writings of Paramhansa Yogananda (e.g. *Autobiography of a Yogi, 1946*)

6.1 Spirituality

The model for education at Ananda is a holistic one, built on an understanding of the human as rational, emotional, physical and spiritual. The school stresses the distinction between teaching religion and developing one's spirituality. One staff member described this as a common concern of prospective parents:

> Now it's a little less charged, because we've changed the name to Living Wisdom. Of course when we had the name Ananda, we were in the Ananda church building, attached to it, of course there's the concern that it is a "religious" school. But it's *not* a religious school, it's a spiritual school, and they work with the whole child, and spirit is a part of that.

LWS positions itself as recognizing the underlying unity of all religions, the existence of a divine force, and that "great ones" throughout history each have something to teach us about truth and living in truth. One parent recounted the experience she and her husband had when their daughter, now in 6th grade, first came to Ananda for 1st grade:

> If you had asked me ten years ago, or told me that my child would be in this school, that was connected with any kind of philosophy of that [religious] sort, I'd have thought "You're nuts!" Because I grew up in that. I went to a Lutheran school, not for very long, but enough that I got a taste of it. And my husband is completely atheist, so he wasn't looking for anything like this…
>
> At first it was a real struggle for my husband, because our daughter would come home, and she'd sing some of the chants, and he'd have a real problem with it. And then of course, as soon as I mentioned it to Naomi [the head teacher], that Bob had a problem with one of the songs because it had the word "Lord" in it, she said, 'Oh, we need to talk!' I mentioned it to her at 8:40 in the morning- at 3:30 in the afternoon we were having a meeting, with Bob, and me, and Naomi. Because that's how strongly she feels about addressing things that need to be addressed. And all the teachers are like that... She just explained that there are certain words that you just don't have other words to replace them with, and that they are not teaching any kind of dogma at this school, and that it is universal spirituality, and it is not following any one particular religion. It satisfied him.

Of keen interest is how the students come to understand their own personal spirituality. I found LWS students exhibited a notable openness when discussing religion and spirituality. I spoke to a seventh-grade boy, Keith, whose family resides in the Ananda community, about the topic of religion:

> BT: How do you see yourself in terms of what you believe, or in terms of religion or spirituality?
>
> Keith: Oh… people say that I'm Christian or something, but I don't think so. My mom and dad say I'm either a Catholic or Christian, I always get 'em mixed up.
>
> BT: But you don't know what that means?

> Keith: Well Christians believe in Christ and nothing else. And… Catholics- I don't even know. It seems like they're a lot more common out here though. I really don't know. I just believe in God. And I believe in the avatars they send down, or at least the ones I know about. I mean there's also saints from India that are very spiritually realized. Sri – something. And Mother Teresa, people like that. But there are sort of fakers out there. I think the guy who puts his hands on people's heads and they fall back - I don't believe in that.

Keith also commented that most of the kids "don't like meditation" and that "they have the giggles" but that he learned to appreciate it more as he got older.

Former Ananda student Mariah, now 13, also lives in the Ananda Community with her family. She comments:

> The one thing about Ananda that's different from other spiritualities, like Christian and Muslim- the difference is that there's almost no rules. There's not a lot of "You *have* to do this ---, this is part of it- you must [do that]". A lot of it's just "This is what we think can help. And you don't have to take it. We're not going to make you. We're not saying you're going to go to Hell if you don't or something." It's kind of like, "We're not saying that many of the beliefs of other people are wrong. We're just saying these people have become really happy, and this is how you can do it too if you want to. We're not saying you have to meditate. We're just saying you can."

She distinguishes herself from others she knows who are "very into Ananda", saying that she is interested in seeing "what else there is" and that she is "going outward" right now. But having been part of Ananda since she was 4 years old, she clearly feels at home and says, "this is something that I can always come back to."

Students at LWS have a variety of religious orientations, coming from families with Catholic, Hindu, Protestant, Jewish, and non-religious backgrounds. They find that Ananda's approach is not only compatible, but also complements their own personal beliefs and practices. Sara describes how she talks to her children about the concept of God:

> It's more to create an environment within which, when we talk about the great people that we study, in our plays, for example, Moses- through those stories, their relationships with God. What qualities do they develop? We talk about things like angels. When the mother of a little girl in our class died, they all had different ideas about that. Some said, 'You go to heaven.' Some said, 'You become a part of everything.' And so what I do is, I say that all the views are good, and we can have different ideas. So it's more to draw out their natural devotion, and then, whatever their family is teaching them, also to respect that. So all of it can be there. We are not teaching them a specific thing about who God is, except that God is love. And you don't have to even think that *God* is love, but that love is the prevailing power in the universe.

Naomi adds:

> Yes, we say that on purpose, and we say that a lot. What does that word God mean? It means the energy that is the love that we feel whenever we love anything. It's that most

> powerful energy of all. The energy that heals, the energy that forgives. The energy that is beyond us, and within us, and sometimes we express that. We all know moments when suddenly we look at a sunset, and something is just going on. Or we are looking at someone we love that we are angry at, and grace descends. And so we live with the mystery, but we call it the energy that is love. So that dispels that idea of God becoming our smallest notion of the "white grandfather", sitting in the armchair somewhere in heaven, who judges you or who accepts you.

I wondered whether students are comfortable with spiritually-oriented conversation that has very few definitive answers, in contrast to what more traditional religions have historically attempted to provide. The teachers commented that although the students rarely pushed the teachers for exact answers, they do argue among themselves about one point or another. The memorial service for their classmate's mother prompted one student to ask about reincarnation. Naomi talks about her response:

> I responded, 'That is one of the possibilities that many, many people believe.' We answer like that. This way they get to live with truth and wisdom in its complexity, and with [our] full hope that they will decide. Or if their family has already decided- we know some of these families really well, for example, one student is forever saying, "Mother Mary, Mother Mary." And I wouldn't insist on Buddha, you see, it's ridiculous. It's all a vehicle for something so much bigger that we can't conceptualize with our words.

And the teachers also point out that they don't attempt to answer something they don't know, for example, questions about why death and suffering exist. They talk about the mystery, and admit to the children that they are also wondering, and thinking about the same things. But Sara adds:

> The being together, the focusing on love and joy, and being kind to one another, all these things lift our experience. And also learning about the power of prayer- we say healing prayers for people... when there's an earthquake, we do the earthquake drills, but the best thing always is to pray. They know that's something they can use in a time of need.

6.2 The Annual Theatre Production

As one teacher describes, "Our theatre production is the heart of what we do spiritually." The Living Wisdom School takes great pride in its annual theatre production. Each year this event requires a prodigious amount of effort from every student, parent, and teacher in the school in creating an inspiring portrayal of the life of one of history's spiritual heroes. These productions, which can be up to two hours long and include elaborate sets, complex dialogue, professionally-choreographed song and dance routines, and hundreds of costumes, have in the past focused on the lives of the Buddha, Krishna, St. Francis of Assisi, Joan of Arc, and this year, Moses.

The principal of the school writes the original script for the play, based on her detailed research into the lives of these historical figures. The faculty takes on direction and production responsibilities. Kindergarten teacher Sara has a dance background, and describes the intensity with which the faculty involves themselves in the production:

> We love it. And that's why the children love it... We demand a certain quality of what we've put into it, which also demands of the children a higher quality, which they rise to,

> and are thrilled to rise to.... Our attention to every detail in it - we approach it like it's a Broadway show. We really do, because we care about it that much.

Extensive rehearsals take place for six-weeks before the performance. Every student has at least one part, and often more. Adults, including some teachers and church members, also have major cast roles. In this way, it is not a school play, in the traditional sense of having only children in the cast. It is more of a community production, but one in which the *entire* school community is involved. We see the recurring theme from *Education for Life*, of the older children and adults working in a natural manner together with the younger children, and elevating their collective skills and abilities in the process.

When the teachers first introduce the play to the school early in the year, they are very clear about setting the proper framework for the production. The whole school, from Kindergarten through seventh grade come together, and the teachers read the script out loud while the students listen. Head teacher Naomi comments on how the play is much more than just a dramatic production:

> We tell them that we are not doing just any old play. We are not even just telling the story of a man who lived in a powerful and creative way. We tell them we are sharing the truth of the ages. We're sharing the truth of a man who gave the world rules to live by that will make us happy, that will transform this world.

The children overall are highly motivated to learn lines that are often beyond their current reading and vocabulary level, and to understand them completely so that they can express them with proper feeling. The teachers spend weeks working with the students to help them to understand the details of the lives they are celebrating, and the qualities that made these individuals exceptional. As Kindergarten teacher, Sara, explains:

> "If you watch a group of children, even five-year olds, listen to a story on Hanukkah, or Jesus, or Buddha, and they know its real- they're riveted. And it thrills me, because so much of children's entertainment today is just about entertaining them, and that if you give them too much depth, they're going to be bored. And it's exactly the opposite."

While the school appreciates the value of the dramatic arts in their own right, the larger purpose is for the students to learn about the "great ones" throughout history who are "fully-expanded" and "self-realized." The students research the lives of the central characters, as well as the larger setting and context with respect to history, geography, art, literature and so on. Moreover, the teachers believe that the students internalize, as they learn the lines and scenes of the play, the highest kinds of thought, belief, and action, as embodied in these individuals. As Naomi says, "It gives [the children] heroes. It gives them the highest of human possibility, and that's what thrills them."

Occasionally, students exhibit some impatience during the approximately six weeks of intensive rehearsal time. One 4th grade student commented, "The thing I like best about the play is when it's over." He described how rehearsals often interrupted something else he was working on, such as writing in his journal, and that "you never get to finish anything." He seemed more the exception. Another veteran of several plays commented that he really liked taking part in the productions. He didn't care if he had a part with a lot of lines- "I like being there. If I didn't have any lines I'd just stand there, you know, I don't care! I just want to be there, I just want to be in the scene."

6.3 "Learning to Be Nice"

A frequent distinction that parents and children make between Ananda and other schools is the emphasis placed on consideration of others and making every child feel welcome and valued. This came out clearly in my interviews with students, when I asked what they like most about attending Living Wisdom School. One first-grader replied, "They teach us to be nice to ourselves." A 6th-grade girl responded, "I like the school a lot… it's just how they manage it. Everybody has to be a friend. It's not like public school… these teachers help with everything." A 13-year old graduate who had attended LWS from its inception, echoed similarly: "We had really good relationships between everybody in the school."

LWS students begin to learn to be aware of their actions, motivations, and their potential consequences from Kindergarten onward. They become attuned to of the difference between caring and considerate attitudes and behaviors and inconsiderate behavior. This understanding is reinforced in several ways. It begins with the "Living Wisdom School Rules", which are prescriptions, but in a very different sense of the word. These rules are displayed on a decorated hand-drawn poster in each classroom.

Living Wisdom School Rules

- Enjoy Yourself
- Practice Kindness
- Choose Happiness
- Be a Loving Friend
- Laugh Often
- Trust Yourself
- Find the Joy Within You
- Use Your Will to Create Good Energy

Figure 1. Ananda Rules

The rules serve as reference points throughout the course of the day, for the teacher working with a student in the classroom or helping children through a disagreement on the playground. The teachers seek to empower their children with positive ways of resolving the conflicts. Naomi says that "inner strength does not come from protecting children from conflict, but from helping them face and successfully work through the challenges that will inevitably arise in life."

Inclusiveness is central to all activities at the school. Age and gender separations are de-emphasized. It is the norm to see mixed-age and mixed-gender groups of children having lunch together and playing together at recess. One young man, a 4th grader, described his friends:

> My friends are all usually from lower grades…. I sometimes hang out with the girls, but you know, it's not like that's bad or anything. I mean, they're totally comfortable with it. It's not like they go "Shoo-shoo-shoo" - like that. You know, they let me play with the hula-hoops, sometimes Ian plays with the hula-hoops, or Steve… I have a friend in 2nd grade, his name is Alan, and he's kind of like "the guy who wants to annoy you."

> (laughs) That's pretty much his life. He can run around going, "I'm not here, I'm not here."

The rule "Be a Loving Friend" is more than a platitude. Teachers actively discourage cliques, as do the students themselves who talk about trying to stay attuned to the feelings of others. Key to cultivating this consciousness in the students is the caring and respectful way in which teachers interact with each other and with each of the students. The teachers are very aware of their influence as models of behavior. As Kindergarten teacher, Sara, described:

> We all know that we teach who we are. And that's why all of this- the approach... we're trying to live the same things we are talking about. We all know it's who we are that transfers most to the children, much more than what we say.

Teachers at Ananda assert that self-awareness can't be acquired by memorizing points facts, or rules; and there is no test at the end that can signify completion. Sara talks about this process of helping the children to become self-aware:

> A lot of this is kind of being a scientist. So it's not just saying, "I'm going to be kind." It's actually getting to experience, 'When I am kind, how do I feel?' 'Do I feel happier, was it hard to do that? Was it hard to share the toy? A little bit.'

The process requires helping the children pay attention to what they do and feel, to help them develop their own dynamic of experiencing and reflecting. As one staff member comments:

> We constantly do it. Not at a specific time. You know, effective parts of a curriculum are brought into schools for twenty minutes, twice a week, 'Well how do you feel?' That kind of thing. We integrate it into everything, and that's of course powerful.

Developing self-awareness is a life-long process, one in which the teachers see their students, and as importantly, themselves, as active participants.

6.4 Celebrating Individual and Collective Achievement

Teachers see their task to be one of providing rich opportunities for each child to discover what she herself can do, to self-reflect, and hence, to grow. Competition among students is minimized where possible. The underlying premise is that each child is his or her own unique person. Achievement is fostered, but in a broader sense than academic performance. Emphasis is given to encouraging the expression of each child's natural abilities and talents. For example, in the whole school end-of-year celebration, each child receives a individualized certificate of commendation, not for advancement to another grade, but for the unique expression of their energies in a specific positive manner during the past year.

Teachers do not assign letter grades because they have found that competition is an inevitable consequence, which then becomes a distraction to learning. Written students evaluations are provided to parents twice a year, once in narrative form, and the other as a checklist, with comments. The students are taught soccer and basketball, but again the emphasis is for students to improve their own skills, rather than to 'beat the other team'.

One example of the school's community atmosphere is the Joyathon. The Joyathon is the LWS fund-raiser in which students take pledges from friends and relatives to perform an activity

in a marathon fashion over the course of the morning. Students choose the activity they wish to perform and set a personal goal for their level of achievement.

> *On a clear, slightly breezy Saturday morning in May, the school held its annual Joyathon at a regional park. Parent volunteers sit at a table waiting for the familiar faces to come through. Small clumps of helmeted children come by, waving and yelling out their total. They circumnavigate a 1-mile or a 5-mile paved path in the park, checking in at the table after completing each lap or two to have their achievements recorded, and sometimes grabbing a snack or drink. The parents at the recording table celebrate each lap with cheers, especially for the little ones.*
>
> *One boy of 8 or 9 years in a baseball cap, and wearing a pair of binoculars about his neck, sets off with his mother, older brother, and sister to begin a day of bird watching. Armed with a birding checklist, which his mother had helped him create, and a bird-book, he dashes over to a nearby bush to examine his first species of the day, to begin his tally. The teachers, equipped with a boom box and dressed in aerobics wear, trot up to an open area to begin earning their pledges by doing movement exercises to music. At the same time, another group of children and their parents start chanting at the Ananda community.*

One of the school's co-founders who was away at Ananda's Italy community, participated remotely. He accepted pledges from Ananda community members in Italy, and took on the personal challenge of drinking eleven cappuccinos over the course of the day. Each year the Joyathon concludes with lunch and an awards ceremony at the Ananda Community, where the achievements of each participant and the whole school are celebrated and recognized.

7. Caring, Spirituality, and Schools

LWS is a small school, with a very intimate setting. There is unarguably an advantage in a situation where every teacher knows every child, and the personal contact that such a student-teacher ratio allows. But beyond close student-teacher relationships, LWS creates a very specific kind of space, one in which a child seems able to grow without fear of failure or judgement. Promoting growth, in a multi-dimensional, holistic way, is something that LWS takes very seriously and appears to do well.

In light of educational theory, Ananda exemplifies to a great extent Noddings' moral education framework based on an ethic of caring, as well as Dewey's philosophy of attending to individual needs and capacities. Noddings (1984, 1992) describes four major components of this framework as modeling (teachers model caring), dialogue (common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation), practice (provide opportunities for caregiving and caring attitudes), and confirmation (seeing the admirable in each person, and encouraging the best in others). All four of these components are integral to the Ananda environment.

Noddings' argument for a caring-centered model of education derives from a philosophical basis, i.e. the Heideggerian notion of the caring relation as definitive of the human condition. The emphasis on caring at Ananda is also derived from the understanding of the loving nature within each person, but which finds its source in the spiritual core of human experience.

The obvious challenge of a non-sectarian school, at least for religious educators, is how to make spirituality tangible and meaningful without the vehicles of ritual and formalized belief,

or something like religion class. LWS provides a set of spiritually-based practices through its circle time, prayer, the classroom altar, and meditation. Students have the daily opportunity to communicate with and to experience, in some way, the divine. The children are also beneficiaries of the moral and spiritual models provided both by the teachers in the school as well as the historical figures which they study in detail. LWS teachers provide a kind of "spiritual mentorship", towards helping the students to reflect upon profound questions, to discern from their own understandings a meaningful path for their lives. The goal of LWS seems to be not to have children reach the point where they are able to articulate the exact nature of their religious beliefs, but rather that they develop a deep consciousness of what is at its core, inarticulable.

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Appendix: Background on Ananda

Ananda, which until 1999 was known as the "Ananda Church of Self-Realization", is based on the practice of meditation, particularly on the practice of the ancient technique of Kriya Yoga, re-introduced to the West by Paramahansa Yogananda. He describes the essence of yoga as follows:

> "Yoga is a method for restraining the natural turbulence of thoughts, which otherwise impartially prevent all men, of all lands, from glimpsing their true nature of Spirit. Yoga cannot know a barrier of East and West any more than does the healing and equitable light of the sun. So long as man possesses a mind with its restless thoughts, so long will there be a universal need for yoga or control."[14]

Another key aspect of Yogananda's mission was to show that all religions are rooted in the same essential truth. He asserted that this unity *lies in the individual quest for self-realization.*

Yogananda established a community of yoga practice and meditation in Southern California, called the Self-Realization Fellowship. Yogananda cultivated a core of disciples, some of whom became monks, or *swamis*. Among his disciples was J. Donald Walters, who spent three and a half years with Yogananda in this community before Yogananda died in 1952. Walters became a monk in 1955. After rising to the vice-presidency of the Self-Realization Fellowship, Walters was dismissed from the organization in 1962, for reasons that remain unclear.[15]

Walters decided to form his own community based on his master's vision of a "World Brotherhood Colony" in which both monastics and lay would pool their resources and live together in co-operative spiritual communities. Yogananda urged people to `cover the earth with World Brotherhood Colonies, demonstrating that simplicity of living plus high thinking lead to the greatest happiness.'[16]

Walters, who later adopted the Sanskrit name "Kriyananda", founded Ananda (a Sanskrit word meaning "joy" or "divine bliss") in Nevada City, a small town northeast of Sacramento, in 1968. What began as a small settlement of tents, tipis, and treehouses has since grown into a permanent community of approximately 350 residents. In addition, other "centers" have been established in Portland, Seattle, Sacramento, Palo Alto, Nevada City, and Assisi, Italy. In conjunction with these centers, Ananda now operates several schools, businesses, churches, and retreat centers. Public classes in yoga and meditation are taught on-site during the week, and daily meditation hours and group yoga postures are conducted in the church.

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[14] From P. Yogananda: Autobiography of a Yogi; Chapter 24. "The *Yoga* system as outlined by Patanjali is known as the Eightfold Path. The first steps, (1) *yama* and (2) *niyama*, require observance of ten negative and positive moralities—avoidance of injury to others, of untruthfulness, of stealing, of incontinence, of gift-receiving (which brings obligations); and purity of body and mind, contentment, self-discipline, study, and devotion to God. The next steps are (3) *asana* (right posture); the spinal column must be held straight, and the body firm in a comfortable position for meditation; (4) *pranayama* (control of *prana*, subtle life currents); and (5) *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses from external objects). The last steps are forms of yoga proper: (6) *dharana* (concentration); holding the mind to one thought; (7) *dhyana* (meditation), and (8) *samadhi* (superconscious perception). This is the Eightfold Path of Yoga which leads one to the final goal of *Kaivalya* (Absoluteness), a term which might be more comprehensibly put as "realization of the Truth beyond all intellectual apprehension."'

[15] Palo Alto Weekly, Feb. 28, 1996.

[16] From Ananda website at http://www.Ananda.org/html/Anandatour.html

It is somewhat unclear whether Ananda considers itself a church, religion, a community of practice, all of these, or possibly none of these. Its own identity as a group is evolving. In the main internet website for Ananda, the following description is given in response to the question "What is Ananda?":

> Ananda is one of many paths that lead to Self-realization (enlightenment, self-discovery, etc.) We acknowledge all paths and saints and sages of all religions. We are guided along our path by the teachings and examples of Paramahansa Yogananda and his disciple Swami Kriyananda. We invite you to join us for as short or as long a journey as you wish.[17]

Some centers simply refer to themselves as Ananda, or Ananda *Sangha* (Sanskrit word for "fellowship") while others include the nomer 'Church'. Ananda has several ministers in each colony, some married, others single. At the core of spiritual practice at Ananda are meditation and yoga, the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda, and the interpretations, writings, and music of J. Donald Walters (Kriyananda).

The altarpiece, shown below, is suspended from the ceiling in the front of the Ananda *Mandir* visited for this study (sanctuary; this term refers to the entire physical gathering place for ritual celebrations). It symbolizes the community's spiritual guidance, both past and present. The lineage of gurus begins with Babaji, shown at the top of the cross, described as a "master of great age, who still lives in the Himalayas, where he remains accessible to a few highly advanced souls." The chain of direct discipleship extends from Babaji (top of cross) to Lahiri Mahasaya (left) to Sri Yukteswar (right) to Paramahansa Yogananda (bottom).

Figure 1. The Altar of the Ananda Mandir[18]

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[17] From Ananda website at http://www.Anandapaloalto.org/rhp/pages/what.html

[18] This altarpiece depicts sources of spiritual guidance for Ananda (from the Ananda website, http://www.Anandapaloalto.org/rhp/pages/gurus.html. Description reads, "In the center is a picture of Jesus Christ. Although Yogananda said, "What a pity that none of the pictures of Jesus Christ really look like him," this painting by Hoffman is the one he preferred because he said it resembled Christ better than most. Directly above Christ is a

The centrality of Jesus Christ in the spirituality of Ananda is explained as follows:

> The presence of Jesus on the altar is more than just a courtesy to Westerners. Yogananda said it was Jesus himself who appeared to Babaji and asked him to send this teaching of Self-realization to the West. At that meeting, Yogananda tells us, Jesus said, "My followers have forgotten the art of divine inner communion. Outwardly they do good works, but they have lost sight of the most important of my teachings, 'to seek the kingdom of God first.'" Thus Babaji sent Yogananda to the West with this mission.[19]

Aside from the fairly large altarpiece, the sanctuary has retained some artifacts of its previous occupants. While the long wooden pews remain, all kneelers have been removed. As pews were not designed for long periods of seated meditation, participants in services at the Mandir often bring pillows. On each side of the sanctuary is a small alcove that houses pictures of Yogananda. The walls of the church are simply decorated, with a sparse, repeating pattern of eastern and western religious symbols. A round stained glass window, with a motif of a descending dove, stands above the side door, quite likely a vestige of the original occupants.

Sunday Service

On Sunday, the Sangha conducts a one-hour meditation followed by a 1½ hour Sunday service, along with children's Sunday school. The Sunday service of the Ananda Sangha was written by Walters, the spiritual head of the community until 1998. The service is in some ways topologically similar to Christian services, but also contains very unique aspects. It is a ritualized sequence of liturgical elements that includes group chanting and prayer, silent meditation, singing of hymns written by Walters, devotional/ scriptural reading and interpretation (from Yogananda and/or Walters' writings), a sermon, offertory, and finally, the *Festival of Light*. The full details of the service are not germane to this paper, but as I found the Festival of Light particularly interesting, I will comment on it a little further.

The Festival of Light is the centerpiece of the Sunday service. I found it to possess very similar dynamics to the Eucharistic prayer and communion at a Catholic mass. However, its focus is not the re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice, but rather the ritualizing of our own process of self-realization. A twenty-minute recitation led by the minister begins with the ritual telling of a story of a little bird leaving its nest to find its way in the world, as allegory to one's own spiritual awakening. Special prayers are then offered in acknowledgement of the divine grace personified by the continuing presence of the masters (i.e. the fully self-realized) as spiritual guides.

The distinctly sacramental nature of the Festival of Light becomes vividly apparent when the Lightbearer (minister) raises a lit candle to the altar, symbolizing "the light that is in us being offered to the infinite light of God", while the congregation joins in ritual song. Then, in a manner highly analogous to the distribution of Communion in Christian services, all present are invited to come to the altar to receive "the touch of light from the masters." The assisting ministers light their candles from the single candle. As congregants come forward, the Lightbearer and assisting ministers transmit the light by passing his/her hand across the candle flame and touching each person "at the spiritual eye, the point between the eyebrows."

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drawing of Babaji; there is no known photograph of Babaji. To the right is Sri Yukteswar, to the left is Lahiri Mahasaya, at the bottom is Paramahansa Yogananda.")

[19] From Ananda website: http://www.Anandapaloalto.org/rhp/pages/gurus.html

Living in the Ananda Community

My focus in this paper is on the Ananda School. However, since the teachers at Ananda live in the Ananda Community, it seemed useful to include some background. A subset of the local Ananda Church members live in the Ananda Community, about 4 miles away from the school/church buildings. I gained some insight into life at the Ananda Community through conversations with teachers and parents who live at the community residence. Several of my interviews were conducted on-site at the Ananda Community apartment complex. The apartment complex is not luxurious by any stretch of the imagination. It is situated in a middle income area, among other similar rental properties. The owner of the complex is a member of the church, who agreed to make the complex available to community members on a long-term basis. Tenants still pay close to market-rate rents for the small studio, 1, and 2 bedroom apartments. Community residents are very clear to explain that life in the "Community", which to observers may seem to be an idealistic retreat from real life, is not intended to be such . Ananda community members are pragmatic about what it is to live in a community. They on the whole feel much more connected to their neighbors, and particularly to those involved in common endeavors, such as the school. Conversations on the walkways are common, as are friendly greetings to one another by name. But residents also mention how they still have to learn to get along with each other. As one resident commented, "People are people, and you still have the same sorts of negotiating about things that goes on anywhere else."

People in the community hold a variety of jobs and professions, and maintain their own lives separate from one another. While the residents, which include families, couples, and singles live in their own separate apartments, the complex has a "community room" with a kitchen and several long tables, as well as a community garden and small playground.

Recent Difficulties at Ananda

The name "Ananda" has weathered a difficult last few years. Allegations of sexual harassment by Walters and another senior minister in Nevada City were highly publicized in a lawsuit filed by a former community member in 1995. Walters' credibility as a celibate monk (swami) and spiritual guide was called into question. As a result, dozens of members chose to leave the community. He has since stepped out of his long-held role of spiritual guide for Ananda and has chosen to reside in the Assisi community. Due to financial pressures ensuing from legal expenses, Ananda declared bankruptcy in December of 1998. Despite some level of public speculation about Ananda's status as church, community, or cult, and the group's wrestling with questions of character regarding Walters, many Ananda members remain strongly committed to the principles of the community, as well as supportive and respectful of Walters as teacher and founder of Ananda.